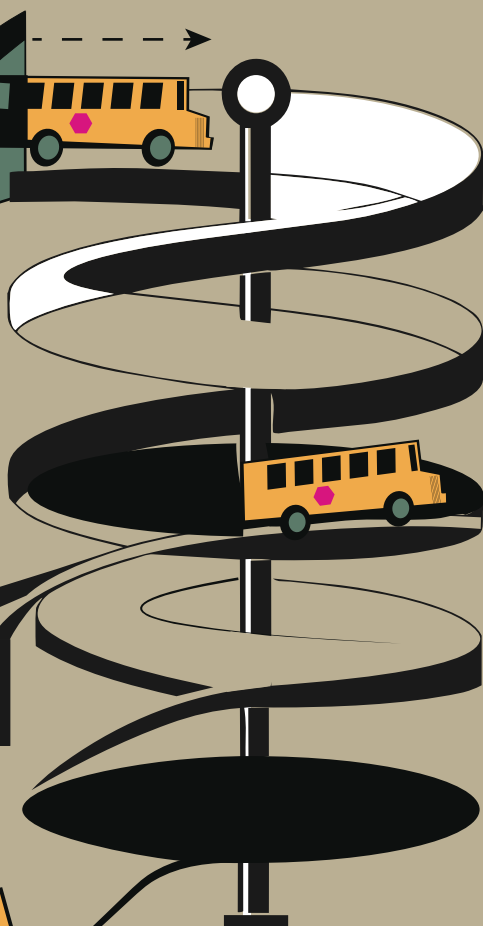
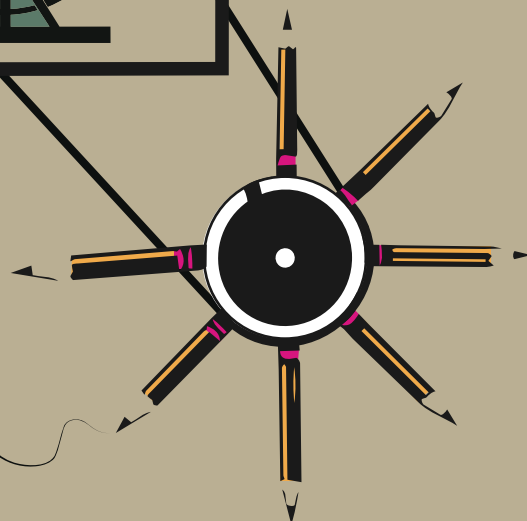


TOMORROW SCHOOLS



education's next
chapter is already
being written



Introduction

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When we arrived at Harvard, none of us thought we would spend the year travelling across the country visiting small schools. We met in the course “Why Innovations in Education Fail and How They Can Succeed”, taught by Michael Horn, cofounder of the Clayton Christensen Institute. Each of us had different backgrounds, spanning teaching, school administration, cognitive science, and technology, but the same question about what it would take for K–12 education to truly change.

Education is not short on imagination, motivation, or talent. Every year brings new ideas, curricula, and technologies. Yet anyone who has spent time in schools knows how often promising innovations stall or get absorbed into existing routines. The system remains remarkably unchanged.

Disruptive innovation theory gave us a way to understand why. The core issue is not a lack of good ideas, but the rigidity of the system itself. In a landscape defined by regulations, standardized tests, seat-time requirements, and entrenched structures, most “innovations” are forced to conform to the existing model. They are layered on top of the current system rather than allowed to grow outside it into something fundamentally different.

In other sectors, transformation has often begun with solutions that are tech-enabled, lower cost, and initially less established. These early-stage innovations find traction in spaces the dominant system overlooks, and only later move “upmarket.” Applying that lens to K–12, we asked: if something disruptive were emerging, where would we see it?

Our attention turned to an emerging school model: microschools.

Across the country, these small school models- often serving between 15 and 150 students - are quietly taking shape. Many operate outside traditional district structures and some regulatory constraints. They are less tied to age-based grades, fixed bell schedules, and standardized-test-driven accountability, and more free to design from first principles. Starting with a clear sense of purpose, they can build schedules, assessments, technology use, and community partnerships directly in service of that purpose.

In these microschools, we see educators drawing from learning science research and experimenting with emerging technologies like AI, not as add-ons but as core design tools. Unburdened by some of the constraints of scale, they could ask questions that are difficult to tackle in conventional systems.

We realized that if we wanted to understand what a genuinely different future for learning might look like, we needed to study these outliers up close.

We identified seven emerging models across the United States, each embedded in a distinct context and guided by a different philosophy. Some were urban, others suburban or rural. Some emphasized tech-enabled personalization; others centered on community-based projects, apprenticeships, or holistic development. What united them was not a single method, but a shared willingness to question fundamental assumptions about school.

Tomorrow Schools is our attempt to show that the future of education is closer than people understand. Rather than a blueprint, this publication is meant to show that through questioning the purpose of school, radically new designs are possible. In the pages that follow, we invite you into seven very different schools. In each case, we trace how the model came to be, what its founders and educators believe the purpose of school is, and how that belief shows up in the daily experiences of students. Along the way, we highlight how the role of the teacher is evolving, how AI is beginning to shape learning, how relationships anchor academic and personal growth, and how alternative funding and governance structures make new models viable.

Our hope is that these stories expand the vocabulary we have for imagining change. If K–12 transformation is constrained less by a lack of ideas and more by the design of the current system, then spaces at the edges- where educators can experiment with new combinations of purpose, structure, pedagogy, and technology- are crucial.

We see this work as a beginning. The future of learning will emerge from many local experiments, each grounded in a particular community and vision of what young people deserve. By visiting these emerging models and sharing their stories, we hope to make it just a bit easier for educators, families, and policymakers to see and build what might come next.

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The Village School

By Jaysan Shah and Matthew Millikin

The Village School began within the Acton Academy network, sharing Acton's conviction that young people are far more capable than traditional schools assume and that autonomy should sit at the center of learning. In those early years, Village leaned hard into student agency: mixed ages, self-paced work, and learners setting their own goals.

But as the founders watched their first cohorts, a question kept nagging them: What if handing students the steering wheel wasn't enough? They saw that choice without deep thinking can become drifting. Self-direction, they realized, only flourishes when it is grounded in strong community, trusting relationships, and habits of reflection.

So Village treated its model as a living prototype and asked: What if we designed a school that could keep evolving as our understanding of learning deepened?

Over more than a decade of professional learning with Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, the team immersed itself in the learning sciences—visible thinking, metacognition, transfer, and the conditions that foster genuine curiosity. Those ideas slowly reshaped everything from daily routines to long-term projects.

Instead of grade levels, Village now organizes learning into three stages: Spark, Discovery, and Adventure. Spark builds foundational academic and social-emotional skills. Discovery widens the landscape, inviting students to follow questions across domains and test emerging interests. Adventure pushes them into complex, often community-embedded challenges that demand sustained effort, collaboration, and self-management. Across all three stages, autonomy is always tuned to development and anchored in relationship.

What if the city were part of the classroom? In Arlington, just outside Washington, DC, Village students work with local experts, visit institutions, and tackle real problems in the region. Choice becomes participation, not isolation.

And what if we trusted teachers as well as trusting students? At Village, educators are given wide latitude to design, prototype, and adapt. They are treated as creators of learning environments rather than deliverers of a script.

Village's founding, then, is the story of that "what if": a school where agency is nurtured in community—for students and teachers alike—and continually redesigned in pursuit of deeper purpose and joy.

“YOU NEED TO KNOW YOURSELF...”

Walking into the Village School, I had the surprising sense that its most advanced “technology” was not a device at all, but a stance toward learning and assessment. Where many innovation-driven schools start with tools or platforms, Village starts with a deceptively simple philosophical prompt from Harvard researcher David Perkins: What’s worth learning? Their answer is disarmingly direct: students should learn themselves.

Head of School, Maria Vogeley, puts it bluntly: “You need to know yourself before you know what you want to do or who you want to be. It helps you find the motivation and the curiosity around what you want to do next.” In a moment when AI can generate essays, solve equations, and simulate expertise, Village’s design choice feels less sentimental than strategic. If machines are getting better at the “schoolwork” we have historically used to measure “intelligence,” then the uniquely human work of knowing oneself, relating to others, and taking responsibility in the world should be the new north star of education.

What impressed me most is how deliberately this philosophy has been translated into design. Village defines three uniquely human capacities that it uses as organizing principles: humanity, humility, and hard work. Humanity shows up in the cultivation of compassionate relationships: students learn to listen, to attune to others, to navigate conflict. Humility is framed as deep personal reflection: noticing one’s own patterns, biases, emotions, and limits. Hard work is not generic grit, but sustained engagement with real-world

problems alongside experts and community, where effort has visible consequences beyond the classroom.

The book pitch offers a clear example of this philosophy in action. To earn a literacy badge on the public badge posters that track each student’s progress through the learning stages, students must successfully pitch the book they plan to read and later write a report on. Peers evaluate and vote to approve the choice based on a set of criteria. The vote however, is not the point. The practice exists to build self-reflection and teach students to advocate for their own learning. The structure is designed so that students are always doing the thinking, not simply receiving it.

Village has come to call this orientation “humentic” (human-authentic) learning. It’s a deliberate counterpoint to the hype around ed-tech and AI: however powerful our tools become, “navigating life and the world can ultimately only be done by the living.” In other words, you can’t outsource the experience of being a person. Technology here is not the star of the show; it is a support for what only humans can do. Digital tools can extend reflection, connect students with mentors and experts beyond the school, and scaffold complex projects, but the design is always in service of students’ growing ability to think about and act in their own lives.

The most compelling evidence of this design came not from adults but from the middle schoolers we spoke with, whom Village situates in the “adventure” stage of learning. One student reflected that his time at Village had taught him to approach challenges “less as ‘I want to live through this’ and more ‘I want to live in this.’” That subtle shift from outcomes to development captures what the learning sciences describe as intrinsic motivation and mastery orientation. He wasn’t talking about finishing learning; he was talking about inhabiting his experiences, even the hard ones, as opportunities to grow.

What reinforces this is the role of the guide. In the Village School, guides are expected to build strong relationships with students and facilitate the mastery curriculum. What struck us while sitting in the staff room was how little gap exists between what is expected of students and what is expected of their guides. On the wall hung a badge poster much like the ones in the classrooms, where each guide had mapped out their own professional learning journey of mastery and exploration. The school’s



commitment to self-knowledge is not a student program; it is a whole-school culture.

What we saw at the Village School gets at a deeper distinction between assessment and measurement. As the sociologist William Bruce Cameron says, “what counts cannot always be counted, what can be counted does not always count.” In a world where metrics are valued above all else, Village values assessment. The word has its roots in the Latin *assidere*, meaning to sit beside. This etymology tells you everything about the school’s approach: learning is not extracted from students through tests and scores, but drawn out through relationship, self-reflection, and attention. The badge posters, the book pitch, the guides’ own learning journeys: all are artefacts of a school committed to sitting beside its students, meeting the definition of assessment in its truest form.



BEFORE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO DO OR WHO YOU WANT TO BE.”

Elizabeth City-Pasquotan

When Dr. Keith Parker arrived as superintendent in Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools in 2022, he was clear about his aim: not just to raise test scores, but to “fundamentally change how [schools] work and feel” because, in their traditional form, they weren’t working for too many kids.

In 2023, Parker and his team began visiting some of the country’s highest-performing, most innovative schools. Many of the ones that stood out weren’t big campuses at all—they were microschools: small, mixed-age communities where students moved at their own pace and spent large chunks of the day on real-world projects. They returned to Elizabeth City asking: What if we designed a public microschool here, rooted in our local economy and community?

From the start, the design centered on community partnerships. Local business owners signed on, eager to turn work sites into learning sites. One flagship collaboration is with Heather Sawyer of Water Street Real Estate Group: one of her historic downtown Airbnb properties is being renovated to double as the microschool hub. Here, students don’t just study entrepreneurship—they help run the space, learning accounting, marketing, hospitality, and property management as living extensions of their math and ELA work.

k

By William Wiltshire and Ruben Villarreal

Public Schools

Led by principal Colina Bartlett, the microschool day is built around personalized core learning and career-connected, project-based work. Mornings begin and end with social-emotional learning. In between, students tackle math and reading “on their own level,” with no expectation that everyone is on the same page at the same time. By 10 a.m., they’re working in teams on community challenges pitched by local businesses and organizations—solving real problems for real clients.

In a district that sees public schools as the “central part of our community,” the microschool is less a side project than a prototype. The bet is simple but ambitious: if you can redesign one small school day around agency, relationships, and authentic work, you can begin to reimagine the whole system.

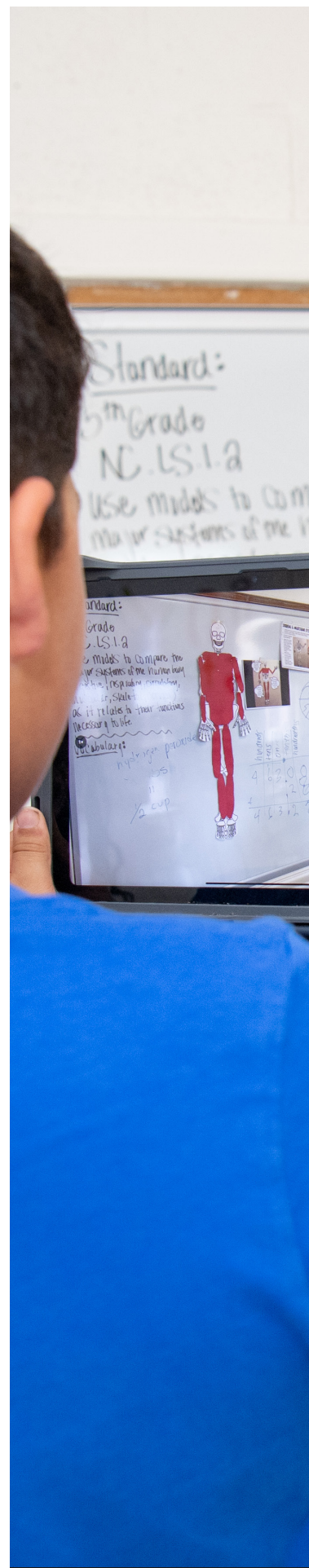
“THE DOGMAS OF THE QUIET PAST ARE INADEQUATE TO THE STORMY PRESENT.”

We pulled into a small parking lot. A red-brick, single-story building stood before a large, unremarkable grass field. We were not convinced we had arrived at the district office until we were close enough to read the letters E-D-U-C-A-T-I-O-N engraved above the main entrance. Inside, we were greeted by Superintendent Dr. Keith Parker, whose warm welcome contrasted the bland aesthetic of the building.

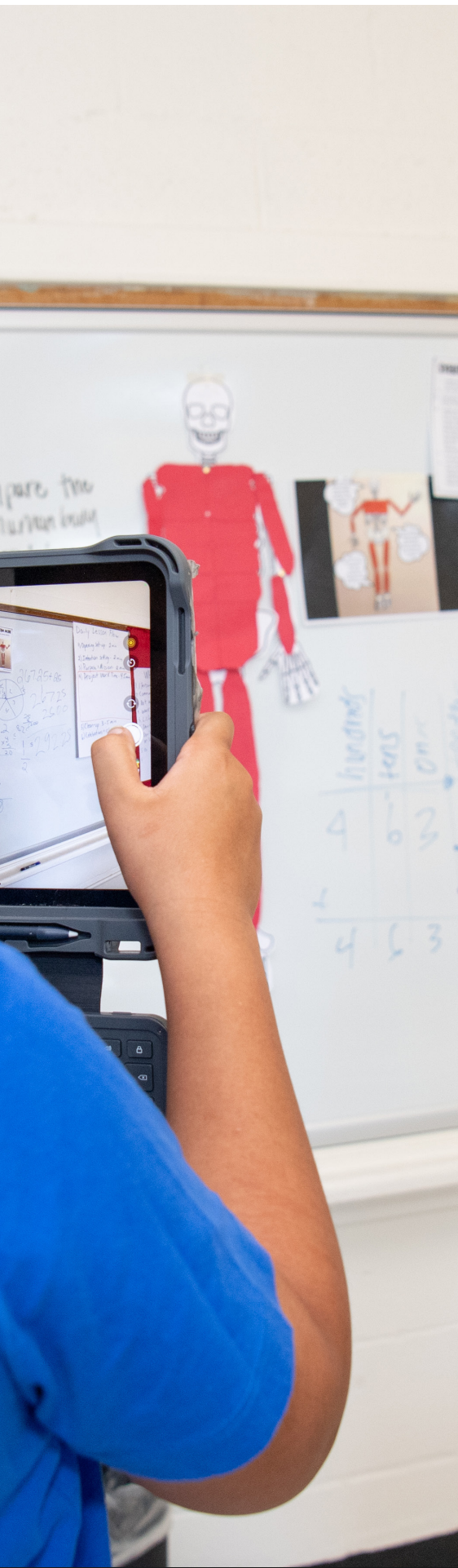
Elizabeth City–Pasquotank Public Schools (ECPPS) is a story about what becomes possible when a district reorganizes the deployment of its human and capital resources, and when the community needs and assets are the core of the school design. Recognizing the region’s robust aerospace economy, with nearby naval and air force bases, and Elizabeth City State University’s aviation program, Parker developed his own aviation program within a district high school. In response to the growing Spanish-speaking population of Elizabeth City, Parker drove a Spanish immersion curriculum in one of his elementary schools, with the goal of expanding to all elementary schools in the coming years.

Parker’s newest and most ambitious initiative is the microschool he has opened within his district. The model serves 25 fifth and sixth-graders, is staffed by three teachers and a principal, and is powered by a bus. The building in which the microschool operates is a formerly segregated school serving only Black students; the great-grandfather of a current student once learned in the same classrooms. By contrast, the great-grandson is leveraging generative artificial intelligence to support his learning.

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.” Parker shared with us the words of Abraham Lincoln to frame the importance of his work. The outdated systems that currently educate our children fall short of the learning experiences they truly need. This belief drove the establishment of the microschool. What was once a site of exclusion is now one of the district’s most deliberate experiments in belonging.



PHOTOS / credit thanks to City-Pasquotank Public Schools



The microschool is, by design, dynamic. Central to the microschool experience is the guarantee that the most meaningful learning and human connection happens outside of the four walls of the classroom.

Ms. Bartlet – the students’ Principal, English teacher, and bus driver – holds a commercial driver’s license alongside her teaching certificate. A rolling permission slip, signed once at the start of the year, means that when an opportunity opens up in Elizabeth City, the microschool takes the learning out of the classroom. No forms, no two-week notice, no scheduling committee. Just Ms. B checking her mirrors, and pulling out of the lot in search of real-life learning experiences for her students.

When we caught up with the microschool at Revitalize Fitness, a gym on Elizabeth City’s main downtown strip. Sweating and active, the students were being led through an intense circuit by a fitness class instructor. The students moved without the self-consciousness you often see in middle schoolers performing for visitors. They were busy. When we asked Dr. Parker how the arrangement came together, he didn’t describe a grant or a procurement process. “We just asked,” he said.

Parker and his team reject the assumption that rural districts can’t offer the same quality of learning that better-funded systems provide. They also acknowledge the reality that rural schools must get creative. In addition to Physical Education at Revitalize Fitness, the school partners with a real estate developer through which students manage an Airbnb property, caring for the home, deciding which local contractors to hire and when, and advertising it as part of a larger study on the economics of local tourism.

Parker’s project challenges the notion that meaningful school choice requires private capital or divorce from government. Parker is direct about it: “Everyone says the government is too bureaucratic to offer innovation in schools. But some things only the government could have done. Only the government could have gotten us to the moon. So why do we act like the government can’t overhaul education if it wanted to?”

The proof of concept for Parker’s microschool can be found in downtown Elizabeth City. For years, the local arts center had run children’s programming only in the hours after school. “Before the microschool,” the director told us, “we could only offer children’s programming after school, limiting our impact.” Now, the microschool uses the space to rehearse its theater performances, and a once-quiet strip of downtown is energized with ten and eleven-year-olds who are “in school.” The community has wrapped its arms around the students. When the microschool needed a theater, the district did not build a new facility. It did not write a new curriculum. It sent a bus.





**“WHY DO WE ACT LIKE
THE GOVERNMENT CAN’T
OVERHAUL EDUCATION
IF IT WANTED TO?”**

NuVu

By Matthew Millikin and William Wiltshire

NuVu grew out of Saeed Arida's Ph.D. work at MIT's Department of Architecture, where he studied how people actually learn to solve complex, open-ended problems. In traditional K–12 schools, students are given a syllabus, clear instructions, and standardized tests—and are implicitly taught to avoid failure. In an architectural studio, Arida noticed, the world works differently: you get a vague brief (“Design a shelter for a homeless person”), produce rough ideas, receive blunt public critique, and iterate through many failures before arriving at something truly good.

Arida's core insight was that the studio model wasn't just good for training architects; it might be the best way to cultivate general creativity and critical thinking in young people. He teamed up with two fellow MIT graduates: Saba Ghole, an architectural designer and urbanist focused on the human side of design, and David Wang, a technologist and fabrication expert who knew how to turn ideas into physical prototypes.

Together they asked a radical question: What if you gave this graduate-level studio experience to 14-year-olds? Many educators assumed high schoolers lacked the maturity and technical skill to thrive in such ambiguity. The NuVu founders disagreed.

Instead of raising millions to build a traditional school from scratch, they took a lean approach. In the summer of 2010, they ran a pilot in Cambridge, inviting high school students into a studio equipped with high-end fabrication tools—laser cutters, 3D printers—and challenging prompts like “Design a piece of wearable technology for a superhero.” The students not only coped but excelled, producing prototypes that rivaled college-level work. This early success suggested the real constraint wasn’t students’ capacity, but the structure of school itself.

To make NuVu viable as a full-time program, the team partnered with Beaver Country Day School and its forward-thinking head, Peter Hutton. Beaver allowed its students to spend a trimester at NuVu, earning credit while immersing in studio-based learning. That steady stream of students and tuition enabled NuVu to open a full-time studio school in Central Square, Cambridge. Over time, NuVu began enrolling full-time students and supporting schools from the U.S. to Scotland and India in adapting the “NuVu model” of creativity-first, studio-based education.



PHOTOS / credit thanks to NuVu

NuVu sits on Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge, between Harvard and MIT. It is a small, independent high school built on the architectural studio model, and it looks the part: wires and tools in plain sight, 3D printers humming in the background, teenagers huddled around workshop tables with complicated machinery close at hand. About fifty students in grades nine through twelve work in design studios, tackling real problems through sustained, hands-on projects. Their instructors are called coaches, many of them trained architects and engineers. Core math and English subjects happen towards the end of the day. The studios come first.

The most radical thing about NuVu might be how it uses time. In a conventional high school, a student bounces between six or seven subjects a day, fifty minutes each, bell to bell. At NuVu, students immerse themselves in a single studio for four weeks before moving on to the next. They complete roughly nine studios in a school year. The result is that when a student is working on a project, it is the only thing they are working on. That kind of sustained attention is rarer in education than it should be, and its effects are visible almost immediately to anyone paying close attention.

At a first glance, NuVu does not resemble a traditional school. There is so much autonomy that it might seem, to the uninitiated eye, that rigorous learning is not happening. That conclusion is misguided. If you look more closely, something worth examining becomes clear. Teenagers who might have struggled in conventional settings, often mislabelled as disengaged or difficult, are more focused and intentional than most schools ever ask them to be. At NuVu, student engagement takes a different form. It shows up in how well their students engage with the design process. When designs fail, and they often do, students tweak and restart. They are taught to seek and utilise feedback voraciously as a means to improve not just their designs, but their process for learning.

What this produces, over time, is a particular kind of learner. There is a clear distinction between students who have just

arrived at NuVu and those who have been there significantly longer. The newer students are still finding their footing, still learning what the design process actually demands of them. The students who have been there a while start to embody the design process, once mastered applying it to any pursuit.

One student spoke about how he has come to value taking time to use research and theory to produce human centred designs, rather than rushing to solutions as quickly as possible. They spoke about how this had caused them to really focus on their writing this year, as a means to communicate their process. That kind of reflection does not arrive quickly. It is the product of repeated cycles of trying, failing, receiving feedback, and trying again. NuVu has thought carefully about how to scaffold that progression, and it shows.



I walked into NuVu's portfolio exhibition carrying a particular set of expectations. From my own teaching experience, I knew what student presentations usually looked like: the nervous shuffling, the index cards gripped too tightly, the relief washing over a kid's face the moment they were done. What I observed instead was something different. One student presented an environmentally friendly car bumper, rethinking a piece of automotive design that is, unbeknownst to most people, a significant annual contributor to plastic waste. Another student had reimagined discarded fabric and worn garments, using natural waxes to extend their wearability. These were not ideas crammed into a week between a quiz and a homework assignment. You could feel the weeks of sustained attention in every presentation.



What was most notable, though, was not any single project. It was the culture of the room. Every student who stepped up to present received applause, and the support was consistent throughout, from faculty and peers alike. Public speaking comfort varied, as it always does, but the climate did not. Building that kind of environment requires consistency and deliberate effort. The confidence visible in these students did not appear to come from grades or performance metrics. It seemed more closely tied to the investment they had made in their own projects, and the commitment to presentation as part of the design process. As each presentation concluded, students spoke animatedly about how they next wanted to iterate, what they had tried, what they had not yet gotten to, what new questions the work had surfaced. They did not treat the output as finished. NuVu appears to have shifted something more fundamental in how these students relate to learning and to the work itself.

**“WHAT IF YOU
GAVE THIS
GRADUATE-LEVEL
STUDIO
EXPERIENCE TO
14-YEAR-OLDS?”**

The Levitt Lab

By William Wiltshire and Ruben Villarreal Halprin

What if we designed a high school on a university campus that started not with standards and seat time, but with one question: What do students really need to thrive in life, not just in school?

That question brought together Arizona State University's ASU Prep network and economist Steven Levitt, coauthor of *Freakonomics* and founder of the Center for RISC at the University of Chicago, who has spent his career challenging conventional wisdom with data. ASU Prep wanted a new flagship high school on the Tempe campus; Levitt wanted a living laboratory to rethink adolescence. Together they asked: What if we designed a hybrid high school that treated curiosity, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving as the core curriculum—and used flexibility and data to support it? (asuprep.asu.edu)

ASU Prep Tempe, powered by The Levitt Lab, is their answer. Opening on ASU's main campus, the school is a tuition-free, grades 9–12 program that blends online coursework, at-home flexibility, and in-person Socratic seminars and “Wonder Sessions” where students tackle contemporary questions and global issues. Instead of marching everyone through the same content at the same pace, students own their learning pathways, supported by guides who coach rather than lecture. (asuprep.asu.edu)

asu.edu) The model borrows from several cutting-edge efforts: ASU Prep’s personalized, outcome-driven curriculum; Levitt’s RISC research on what truly predicts adult success; and the mastery-based, discussion-rich approach of Khan World School at ASU Prep. The design team kept looping back to a “what if” frame: What if grading focused less on points and more on building a love of learning? What if high schoolers spent more time in interdisciplinary projects and seminars than in fragmented, bell-driven periods? What if a teenager’s school day flowed across campus—to labs, libraries, and studios—so that college didn’t feel like a different universe, just the next level? (asuprep.asu.edu)

In that sense, the Levitt Lab at ASU is both a school and a prototype. It’s a bet that by putting a small, hybrid high school in the middle of a major research university—and giving students real agency, rich discussion, and access to university resources—you can redesign what high school feels like while quietly rewriting what it prepares young people to do.

The Levitt Lab (TLL) sits on the main campus of Arizona State University (ASU), and the morning we visited, its students were already outside. Not at recess. Working. Split into groups of three, students traced with chalk the shadows cast by the sun on their yardsticks. This was a Wonder Session. Core to the Levitt model, Wonder Sessions are opportunities for students to ask and answer big, exciting questions. On this day, they were calculating the circumference of the Earth.

As we entered the school building, another cohort lounged with laptops open, rooms buzzing with equal parts conversation and focus. The spaces were dynamic; furniture, bookshelves, the tech, used by the learners how and when they saw fit. Guides, aptly named, monitored student progress, drifted between discussions, then stepped back to observe from afar.

At The Levitt Lab, rather than delivering lessons or managing a classroom through a fixed sequence of instruction, guides help learners build positive work habits and self-awareness. Each learner is paired with a guide who works with the student to set academic and personal goals, and together, they create the strategies required to meet them.

The Levitt Lab operates on an enormous university campus, authentically but responsibly integrating and sharing space with a higher-ed community. TLL students can enroll in ASU courses and earn up to six college credits per semester at no cost. Beyond the rich course offerings, students have access to the university gym, library, and cafeteria.

Students move through the same spaces as undergraduate and graduate students, as well as faculty. The historical relationship between universities and high schools has been one of clear divide; distinctive stepping stones on a student's journey to adulthood. The Levitt Lab and Arizona State University have chosen to permeate those traditional boundaries in an effort to catalyze student flourishing.

The implications of this partnership are substantial. For a student from a lower-income family, six free college credits per semester over four years of high school is a material head start. In making an accessible high school, The Levitt Lab School has simultaneously made college more accessible, too. Learners are developing their own relationship with higher education, learning to navigate it with familiarity rather than apprehension. For students who might be the first in their families to consider college, that proximity is its own kind of preparation, harder to quantify than credits but no less real.

A parallel aspiration of The Levitt Lab is helping students redefine for themselves the purpose of school. We spoke with one student who articulated their own shift clearly: "the purpose of [my traditional] school was to build a foundation of knowledge for everyone, so that people knew the same thing up to a point. But what [TLL] did was introduce me to new ideas and topics that allow me to find what really interests me."

This is a distinction between school as transmission and school as ignition.

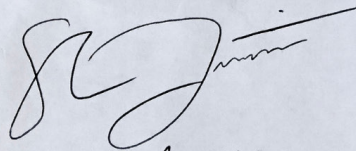
Dear Students and Families,

As a father and as an educator, I have seen firsthand how our education system fails students. By obsessing over grades and traditional curricula, we fail to cultivate the curiosity and creativity that kids need to thrive in our rapidly changing world.

The Levitt Lab is my way of re-imagining school. Here, students won't just memorize answers — they'll ask the big questions. They'll explore, create, connect, and innovate in ways that inspire them to keep learning long after the school day ends.

To the students: this is your journey, and we're here to help you discover your path. To families: thank you for believing in a vision of education that dares to be different.

Let's build the future of education together.



Steven Levitt
Founder, The Levitt Lab



Khan Lab School

By Matthew Millikin and Jaysan Shah

Sal Khan is a former hedge fund analyst turned educator who became widely known for creating Khan Academy, the free online learning platform used by millions of students around the world. In 2004, while still working in finance, he began tutoring his cousin in math remotely, recording short explainer videos and posting them on YouTube so she could replay them as needed. Those homemade lessons, combined with simple practice tools, quickly found a global audience. By 2009 he left his day job to focus full-time on Khan Academy, building it into a nonprofit committed to providing “a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere,” grounded in mastery learning and learner-paced progression.

As the online platform grew, Khan kept returning to a core question: if mastery-based, personalized learning worked so well online, what would it look like in a full, in-person school day? That curiosity led him to create Khan Lab School in Mountain View in 2014. The school was conceived as a separate but deeply related venture: a physical laboratory (“lab school”) where teachers and students could explore ideas that were difficult to test purely online: mixed-age groupings, flexible schedules, project-based work, and new roles for teachers and students. In that sense, Khan Lab School is an extension of the same vision that animates Khan Academy, but it operates as its own

independent school, using a single local campus to prototype what a future, mastery-driven education system might feel like in real classrooms.

As word spread, Sal Khan was frequently urged to replicate the school around the world, but KLS kept its primary focus on serving as one high-quality laboratory campus and refining ideas in context, rather than franchising a frozen blueprint. The belief was that any serious attempt to redesign school has to honor local culture, policy, and community needs. Instead of rapid cloning, in 2023 the team launched the Khan Schools Network to support mastery-based schools in diverse settings- sharing open-source resources, research, and design insights, and partnering with emerging schools such as Khan Lab School Wichita—so that each community can adapt the core principles to its own context while learning alongside others.

The first thing you see when you walk into Khan Lab School in Mountain View is a quote on the wall of the reception: “everyone’s a student, everyone’s a teacher.” It is easy to walk past a quote like that in a school. Easy to assume it is an aspiration rather than a description. At Khan Lab School, it turns out to be both — a statement of values and an accurate account of how the place actually works. The school has built its culture around a simple but demanding idea: that surface-level understanding is not enough.

Many innovative schools have moved away from traditional subject teachers, replacing specialist instruction with guides, facilitators, and technology platforms. Khan Lab School has made a more deliberate choice. Technology is present and students use it regularly to move through content and work at their own pace, but the school has also held onto subject specialists and that combination is intentional.

This belief in deep knowledge extends beyond the teaching staff. At Khan Lab School, the understanding that expertise can come from anywhere is built into how the school operates, and it shapes the nature of the relationship between teachers and students in a fundamental way. At KLS, teachers are not positioned as the sole holders of knowledge and students as the recipients of it. Instead, the relationship is closer to that of thought partners. Teachers bring depth of subject knowledge and experience. Students bring curiosity, fresh perspective, and increasingly, their own areas of genuine expertise. The dynamic that results is one in which both parties are expected to contribute, question, and push the thinking forward. This equality of engagement, the sense that a student’s idea is worth taking seriously and a teacher’s understanding is still developing, creates the conditions for interactions that go well beyond instruction. Learning becomes something that happens between people, not something delivered from one to another.

One of the clearest expressions of this is a peer teaching program in which upper school students teach algebra to middle schoolers. They write lesson plans, design activities, and lead the classes themselves. The program was started by a graduate of the school and has since become part of the culture. What is telling about how it came to exist is as instructive as the program itself. Khan Lab School operates as a lab school in the truest sense: ideas are tried, evaluated, and either integrated or set aside. If something works, it stays. If it does not, the school moves on. The peer teaching program worked.

The reasoning is that technology and passion serve different purposes. Technology can deliver content efficiently. It can pace, adapt, and assess. What it cannot







easily replicate is the kind of nuanced understanding that comes from a teacher who has spent years thinking deeply about a subject, who knows where the interesting questions are, and who can model what genuine curiosity looks like. At Khan Lab School, that expertise sits alongside technology rather than being replaced by it.

Equally distinctive is how the school’s culture of experimentation extends beyond students and faculty to its tight relationship with Khan Academy and Khanmigo, the AI tutor developed in partnership with OpenAI. The Lab School is not just a consumer of these tools; it is part of the feedback loop that shapes them. Students and teachers are regularly asked to test features, report bugs, and suggest changes. In some periods, Khan Academy’s offices were quite literally upstairs from the school, making this feedback cycle highly tangible.

For students, this creates an unusual relationship to educational technology. Instead of experiencing tools as finished products imposed from above, they see them as evolving systems they can influence. Several stories described moments when student feedback later appeared as implemented changes. Early in their schooling, they are learning what it means to offer constructive critique to adults who are older, more experienced, and leading a

globally recognized organization - and to see that critique taken seriously.

This emphasis on depth over speed also shapes how the school thinks about its own growth. In contrast to many Silicon Valley ventures, Khan Lab School has not tried to replicate itself as a chain of branded campuses, despite interest from other cities and countries. The school’s leadership has consistently framed the Lab School as one model among many, suited to its specific community and context. Rather than claiming to have found the universally “best” design, they talk about learning alongside a network of other microschools and innovative programs, each with its own values and local constraints.

PHOTOS / credit thanks to Khan Lab



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EVERYONE'S A TEACHER"

Red Bridge

By Ruben Villarreal Halprin and Aashna Mago

Red Bridge School grew out of a conviction that school could be fundamentally redesigned around one core human capacity: agency. Founder and Head of School Orly Friedman had been obsessed with education since childhood, fascinated by why some classrooms seemed to unlock kids while others quietly shut them down. After college, she joined Teach For America and began her career in 2007 as an elementary teacher in Washington, D.C. There, she saw how much a child's trajectory could hinge on the luck of which classroom—and which teacher—they happened to land in. The system, she felt, was too dependent on heroics and too thin on structures that helped every child become an active driver of their own learning.

Friedman moved to the Bay Area and joined the founding team of Khan Lab School in Mountain View, a lab school inspired by Khan Academy's vision of mastery-based, student-paced learning. At KLS and later as an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Transcend, she helped design and study experimental school models that gave students more voice and choice. Those years deepened a hunch: innovative schedules and cool tools weren't enough. What mattered most was whether students were actually developing the ability to set their own goals, manage their time, and navigate increasingly complex decisions—a durable sense of agency they could carry into any future.

By 2018, as technology and automation accelerated, Friedman was guided by the question: what if agency weren't just a feature of a few practices, but the organizing principle of the entire school? Strong academics still mattered, but as means, not ends. Drawing on advances in cognitive science and psychology, and on a progressive lineage from thinkers like Dewey and Montessori, she took a year to start from first principles: If agency were the goal, how would you rebuild school from the ground up?

That design work touched everything: daily schedules, student groupings, assessments, roles for adults, even the language the community used. In place of traditional grade levels, she imagined a system organized around "autonomy levels," where students would be promoted not just for knowing more content, but for demonstrating that they could choose meaningful goals, plan steps toward them, and follow through.

In 2020, Friedman opened Red Bridge School, an independent K–8 school in San Francisco, as a small but ambitious demonstration site for that vision. Today, students advance through autonomy levels as they show increasing ownership over their learning, supported by adults who act more like coaches than lecturers. The school's mission is explicit: to develop agency in every child as the foundation for academic and life success, within a community intentionally designed to be inclusive and reflective of the city it calls home.



“WHAT IF AGENCY WEREN’T JUST A FEATURE OF A FEW PRACTICES, BUT THE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE OF THE ENTIRE SCHOOL?”

We were lucky to have arrived a bit early to Red Bridge. We stood on 3rd Street in San Francisco, amid the hustle and bustle of morning rush hour. Red Bridge is certainly a city school, housed in a building that has the bones of a factory or textile mill in a previous life.

But as cars rushed past on the busy thoroughfare, brief pockets of calm would catch our attention. A woman in a red vest walked by, four elementary-aged learners in tow, their backpacks, much too large for their little bodies, dangled around the backs of their knees. We were standing outside long enough to see several of these flocks walk by and enter the school. Red Bridge learners walked the streets of San Francisco’s Dogpatch neighborhood with the same confidence we saw in the young professionals headed to the train, but with an eagerness and excitement working folks of San Francisco would envy.

Red Bridge’s mission – to develop a sense of agency in every child as the foundation for academic and life success – is taught with the same voracity and intention as any core academic subject. Even in watching students arrive, the potency in which that mission is aligned to the work of the school’s practitioners was apparent.

The school has a crisp, specific definition of agency: setting goals and having the will and skills to achieve them. That structure shows up in the texture of the school day. Learners work with learning guides on their metacognitive skills. As we observed classrooms, what we initially assumed to be a math lesson turned out to be something more deliberate; an opportunity for learners to reflect on what they had covered that week, the moments they had flourished, and the content that most challenged them. The structure of the schedule supports learners and guides in that awareness. At Red Bridge, learners cannot choose

whether or not they do math every day, but they do get placed in one of five classes based on the right level for them. Math placement is decoupled from their reading level and their autonomy level. Situating learners through their competency in these domains results in a transformative balance for kids; independence without chaos, personalization without dependence on tech programming.

Learners in the upper autonomy levels arrive Monday morning to find a weekly schedule color-coded and half-completed, and in the blank spaces, which comprise about an hour each day, they can choose the specific skills, activities, or meetings that will best shape their learning in the coming week. For Red Bridge’s youngest learners, the process is similar, but simpler and on a shorter timescale. Learners in lower autonomy levels plan one day at a time rather than a full week ahead.

Red Bridge is proactive in its approach. Autonomy is to be built and cultivated, and they recognize that good teaching instruction, not as a hindrance to autonomy, but a means to get there. During the morning session in Autonomy Level 1, we got to observe one of the school’s founding teachers transition students from an independent reading block to their morning circle. She used a bell to call for students’ attention, waited until she had all the students still and looking her way, then gave quick, concise, and sequential directions. The expectation for students during what followed was evident, as they responded accordingly, moving with urgency towards their next task. One might think that a school centered on autonomy would lack routine, structure, and cohesion.

Red Bridge’s funding model was another surprise. It is private, but that can serve as a veil to what the school is actually trying to do. Tuition runs on a sliding scale—families

pay what they can—and the location in Dogpatch is not incidental to that. The T-line stops nearby, connecting the school to downtown San Francisco in one direction and to Bayview-Hunters Point in the other, one of the city’s historically working-class neighborhoods. Orly Friedman, the school’s founder, was direct about the intention behind all of this. Red Bridge’s goal is a student body that reflects the full diversity of San Francisco, not the slice of it that can afford to choose.

For a family in Bayview with limited options, a sliding-scale private school on the T-line is something different than a private school. It is, in the school’s own language, an expansion of agency. Red Bridge has spent considerable effort making sure that the goal of attending isn’t out of reach before a family ever walks through the door, ensuring that the will to get there is enough, and the skill to thrive once inside is something they’ll help build.

Alpha School

By Jaysan Shah, Matthew Millikin, and William Wiltshire

Alpha's story begins, like Village's, in Austin as an Acton Academy offshoot committed to learner agency. The original school embraced mixed-age studios, self-paced work, and the belief that students should own their learning. That Acton DNA—agency, autonomy, learner-driven culture—still runs through Alpha. But the trajectory shifted when one parent, technologist and billionaire Joe Liemandt, joined founder MacKenzie Price, and together, they began to envision how AI might radically reconfigure the school day.

Liemandt first encountered AI at Stanford in the 1980s, working on expert systems before founding Trilogy, a software company built on using algorithms to solve complex configuration problems. Watching his own children in this small, experimental school, he recognized another complex system: a classroom trying to move a diverse group of learners through the same material at the same pace. For decades, learning science had pointed to mastery learning and one-on-one tutoring as the gold standard—but impossible to scale. Liemandt's wager was that modern AI could finally operationalize those insights for every child, every day.

He committed an extraordinary sum—around a billion dollars from his companies—to rebuild the school around that premise. The result is Alpha's defining feature: a “2-Hour Learning” model powered by an AI platform called TimeBack. Instead of six hours

of teacher-led instruction, students spend about two highly focused hours each morning working through personalized academic pathways. The software continuously diagnoses gaps, adjusts pacing, and requires true mastery before moving on. Alpha reports that, after sustained time in the model, students' scores cluster in the top 1% nationally, regardless of where they started.

Those two hours liberate the remainder of the day. By compressing core academics into the morning, Alpha “buys back” time to focus on what it calls life skills: leadership and teamwork, storytelling and public speaking, entrepreneurship and financial literacy, relationship-building and social skills, grit and hard work. Afternoons revolve around workshops and challenges that push students into real-world tasks—launching ventures, pitching ideas, training for physical feats, collaborating on complex projects.

Alpha's guides (they avoid the word “teacher”) focus on motivation, coaching, and culture rather than lecturing. AI becomes infrastructure; human adults become designers of challenges and stewards of community. In just a few years, the model has expanded from a single Austin campus to more than 20 locations across the United States and Puerto Rico, positioning Alpha as a trailblazer for education's adoption of AI.

“AI BECOMES INFRASTRUCTURE; HUMAN ADULTS BECOME DESIGNERS OF CHALLENGES AND STEWARDS OF COMMUNITY.”

skills development do not need to happen in the same way, at the same time, through the same methods. They can be separated. And once separated, each can be done better.

The academic side of this equation rests on a straightforward but significant claim: using technology, core academic content can be taught, absorbed, and applied faster than conventional schooling assumes. If that is true, it changes the arithmetic of the school day entirely. Time that was previously occupied by academic instruction becomes available for something else. Alpha has a clear view of what that something else should be.

Every day at Alpha follows the same structure. The morning is divided into two blocks of core academic time, during which students work through the Time Back program, a gamified platform that allows them to move through academic content at their own pace, earning experience points as they go.

This reorganization is linked to a particular stance on student ability. Conventional schools tacitly accept that academic performance will spread along a curve: some students at the top, most in the middle, some at the bottom. Alpha, by contrast, is built around the assertion that all students are capable of mastering core academic material at a very high level given the right system. The often-repeated goal that every student can, in principle, reach top-percentile performance on standardized exams functions as more than a slogan; it underwrites the use of intensive, adaptive practice and the rejection of class rankings and traditional grading.

To do this, Alpha also reconsiders the process of motivating students. Traditional schools rely on extrinsic motivators with grades, GPAs, test scores, but often treat them as background features. Alpha makes its motivational economy explicit and central. It replaces letter grades with XP points that students earn primarily through academic work and can spend in a school-based “economy” on goods, privileges, or experiences.

The justification is to mirror adult life: work is compensated, and currency is one way societies recognize effort and productivity. In adopting this structure, Alpha communicates that some parts of learning are likely to feel like work—repetitive, demanding, not immediately meaningful—while others (projects, workshops, social time) will be more intrinsically engaging. Both are presented as legitimate and necessary components of a day, and the extrinsic reward system is used to help students persist through the former to access more of the latter.

Viewed through this lens, Alpha is less simply “a school that uses AI” and more an example of a model that encodes a particular set of beliefs: that technology should reshape the basic grammar of schooling rather than be layered on top of it; that adolescents, given a different architecture, can reasonably see top-level performance as attainable; and that their motivation can be addressed using tools, currencies, contracts, clear trade-offs between effort and enjoyment that mirror those used in adult contexts. As a result, Alpha stands out from the rest of the crowd because of how much it makes its beliefs visible.

Alpha School is not interested in recreating the kind of school experience that makes most parents nostalgic. It is built on a set of beliefs that have captured headlines across the country: (1) academic content can be compressed without loss; (2) life skills are teachable, not just caught; and (3) students can handle more autonomy than they are typically given, and will rise to meet high expectations when real support is in place

These foundational beliefs lead to their hypothesis that academic knowledge and life



A word from the authors

Jaysan Shah

LEARNING DESIGN, INNOVATION, AND TECHNOLOGY



Jaysan is a cognitive scientist with a background in neurotechnology. His work sits at the intersection of learning design and emerging technologies, with a focus on how tools and environments can be designed thoughtfully to transform educational experiences rather than simply digitize the status quo..

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“Across the most compelling school models in the country, I noticed a consistent pattern: they start with a clear, disciplined vision of the kinds of thinking and capacities they want graduates to develop. The strongest schools are anchored by a coherent answer to a deceptively simple question: What is the purpose of school? Once that purpose is clear and well-understood, every smaller element- courses, projects, schedules, externships, advisory structures, even how time and space are organized- can be designed in service of that larger aim.

Rather than chasing the newest technology or trendiest lesson plan, these schools work from the inside out. They draw on learning science and the lived wisdom of their communities to build models that are flexible, iterative, and responsive. Because their core purpose is stable, they can afford to experiment with methods; they adapt without losing their identity.

As AI becomes more capable of delivering personalized learning, we should also ask whether personalization is the ultimate goal. Social media already shows that hyper-personalized experiences can boost engagement while amplifying polarization and weakening our shared public sphere. In education, personalization may raise the floor of learning and make school more engaging, especially where content has been hard to deliver well. But the deeper opportunity is to reorient schooling around distinctly human abilities. Rather than only asking how AI can tailor content to each learner, the more urgent question is how we design learning environments where technology frees time, space, and attention for students to practice the kinds of thinking no algorithm can fully replace.”

William Wiltshire

**HARVARD GSE, ED.M. TEACHING AND
TEACHER LEADERSHIP**



William Wiltshire is a former middle school History and Math teacher who taught for four years in East Harlem, New York. At Harvard, William is exploring the evolving roles of teachers and learners in the world of AI, and how traditional schools must innovate to appropriately prepare children for the future. William believes that responsible implementation of AI will free up significant time in the school day, which schools must then dedicate to building essential human skills.

“What a time to work in education, and what a complex knot we are tasked with untying. Defining the purpose of school, the role of the teacher, and the responsible usage of AI in school over the course of the next handful of years is as exciting as it is intimidating.

With urgency, schools and systems must radically reconsider the experience of their students and teachers, and ensure that the appropriate skills and knowledge are prioritized in pedagogy and philosophy. As entry-level jobs continue to be displaced by AI, it is critical that we teach our children what it means to be human, and we adults might do well to relearn what that means as well. “What do I care about?” “Who am I?” “What am I good at?” “What is my purpose?” Every day at school, kids should get an opportunity to sit with these questions. If children can confidently answer these questions, they will be able to navigate the future, however uncertain it proves to be.

I am filled with tremendous hope having seen the schools profiled in this journal. We met leaders and thinkers who want what is best for children, and who are fearless in their pursuit of system change. There is no best model, and there is no perfect answer yet to the question of AI in education, but these schools are building and iterating, both important first steps.”

Matthew Millikin

HARVARD GSE, ED.M. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



“When I began this project, I expected to find an innovative school model I could bring back to Australia. The schools that most successfully created the rich learning environments I was looking for, however, looked very little like one another on the surface. Any search for a transferable model was, in some ways, the wrong search to be conducting.

What these schools shared ran deeper than structure or format. Two throughlines stood out: the degree to which each school’s philosophy was genuinely responsive to its community, and the extent to which a shared sense of educational purpose was held across students, teachers, and leadership alike. Both qualities resist straightforward replication. The concept of universality without uniformity, which I had encountered in coursework before this project, took on new meaning when witnessed in practice.

In a world where products and information are constantly pushed at people, it was perhaps unsurprising that representation, co-creation, and authentic community building emerged as common themes among the schools we found most compelling. These were not places that had adopted an external framework and applied it faithfully. They were places people had asked for, and then built together.

One question we put to every school leader, teacher, and student we could was simply: what is the purpose of education? The answers were always interesting, and rarely identical. But my working hypothesis, after everything we saw, is that the schools best at building positive and productive learning environments tend to have a positive and more consistent answer to that question across their different stakeholders.”

Matthew is a mathematics educator from Australia. At Harvard, he is studying how human relationships and everyday interactions serve as the active ingredient in learning, placing student well-being and strong teacher–student relationships at the core of effective education.

Ruben Villarreal Halprin

**HARVARD GSE, ED.M. EDUCATION POLICY
AND ANALYSIS**



Ruben is an educator and school leader with eleven years of experience in urban public schools. He has served as a teacher, Grade-Level Lead, and Assistant Principal of Humanities across multiple regions of the U.S. His work is shaped by a belief that schools work best when students and adults are both treated as full participants in their own learning.

“My work is shaped by a belief that schools work best when students and adults are both treated as full participants in their own learning. That conviction has driven my practice across roles: designing programs that give students ownership over their learning, coaching teachers toward autonomy rather than compliance, and seeking out schools that take seriously the question of what education is actually for. Tomorrow Schools is an extension of that curiosity.

I kept coming back to the ways some of these models uplifted student voice and agency in a way that went beyond providing choice. In several examples, we saw how students could design their own projects or adapt part of their day to fulfill a personalized goal. And so I wondered why this wasn't my experience when I was in school, why didn't I foster these opportunities for my students when I was a teacher?

My answer, at the moment, is that I did not make myself accountable to the students I was teaching in the same way that some of these schools do. The question that remains is: can I be accountable to students and state testing at the same time?”

Next steps for this journal...

This initial exploration has underscored that the most powerful insights about the future of learning emerge from diverse contexts. Often, the models that teach us the most are those that challenge our assumptions and expand our sense of what is possible in schools. Building on this work, we hope to continue documenting and analyzing school designs around the world—spotlighting models that push on the boundaries of purpose, structure, and practice. Future editions of this journal will intentionally broaden our lens to include innovations across Asia, Europe, Africa, South America, and beyond. Educational innovation exists everywhere; the more rigorously we study it in its local context, the better positioned we are to make informed, humane, and future-ready design choices for the next generation of learners.

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To Michael, we cannot say thank you enough for helping us believe that genuine innovation in education is possible and for showing how a clear-eyed understanding of the past can guide our navigation of the future. The questions we ask, and the insights we offer in these pages, rest on the foundation of a lifetime of work, scholarship, and relationships that he has already built.

To Paul, we are profoundly thankful for the inspiration he has given us in demonstrating how education changes when new ideas put the theory of disruptive innovation into practice. Through his leadership, we have seen what it looks like when the purpose of school is questioned thoughtfully, and when the needs of diverse learners and contexts are intentionally designed into a school model.

Together, Michael and Paul have modeled for us that a deeper understanding of the world—and of what education can become—often emerges at the edges, when we pay close attention to outliers. By urging us to study schools and approaches that fall outside the mainstream, they have shown that these “exceptions” can reveal the assumptions we take for granted and expand our sense of what is possible. Their guidance has not only shaped this project, but also sharpened our conviction that the future of learning will be built, in part, by taking those outliers seriously.

We are equally indebted to our institutional advisors, Global University Systems and the SEK Education Group. The opportunity to travel, to visit schools in their own contexts, and to follow our curiosity wherever it leads is not possible without meaningful, sustained support. Their backing has given us the time, access, and trust required to listen carefully to educators and students, to sit inside emerging models long enough to understand them, and to share those stories with others. By investing in this work, long before its impact was fully clear, Global University Systems and SEK have affirmed that careful observation, open-minded inquiry, and cross-border collaboration are essential to imagining better futures for learning. For that confidence and generosity, we are profoundly grateful.

GEMENT



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